DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 254 CS 002 999

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TITLE An Investigation of Reading Interests of Children.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (20th, Miami, October 20-23, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Interests; *Childrens Books; Childrens Literature; Educational Research; Interest Research; Primary Education; *Reading Interests; *Reading Materials; *Selection; *Student Interests

ABSTRACT

This study was prompted by the lack of consistency in defining the interests, both general and in the area of reading, of children in the primary grades. Analysis of more than 15 introductory texts used to teach reading indicated that interest measurement is based on certain unquestioned theoretical assumptions. Students in 27 first- through third-grade classes from a southeastern metropolitan school system were given individual-interest interviews and were exposed to group-interest measurement techniques. In addition, primary-level classroom teachers were observed in the effort to interpret their inferences concerning student interests. Data suggest that pupils' expressed interests did not reflect their reading interests; that, although teachers could interpret general student interest with a fair degree of accuracy, this accuracy did not extend to reading interests; that, in more than 60% of the cases, teachers could not recommend a book for pupils on the basis of interest; and that retesting after a four-month interval indicated a significant change in students' expressed interests. (KS)

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An Investigation of Reading Interests of Children

Sylvia M. Carter

This part of the session has been given the title "an investigation of reading interests of children." I need to make three clarifications--

1. To take the edge off the suspense--I am not able to give you a list of student reading interests
2. To more than foreshadow my conclusions--I have some real doubts about all the lists others might make.
3. I have organized this presentation around:
   a. Interests of the primary level child--as well as
   b. Reading interests of primary level children, and
   c. What we as teachers of teachers expect of the classroom elementary class teacher in respect to reading interests.

Let's first consider some of the past research

The interview or questionnaire was the earliest technique used in reading interest research (1890's). The interview/questionnaire is still the most prevalent classroom tool used in assessing interests today. This despite repeated criticisms of the introspective nature of the interview and the suggestion of the value of more unobtrusive measures for observing interests. However, research incorporates many other techniques and variations to investigate reading interests. In fact, the employment of these varying techniques has promoted a lack of commonality in research procedures. This in turn impedes the process of generalizing from one reading interest study to another.

The bulk of research concerning children's interests was initiated prior to the 1950's. The findings of the studies emphasized the learned nature of interests and the influence of

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societal expectations on sex differentiated interests.

Reading interests have been investigated since before the turn of the century. Despite the discussion of individual uniqueness in interests, these studies have emphasized the commonalities of children on the basis of group categories such as age, grade level, intelligence, sex, cultural, socioeconomic and ethnic influences. Research often emphasized the primary level readers' preference for literary presentations as opposed to informational. Stories about animals and fairy tales predominate listings of pupil preferances.

Primary grade level students have been the most often neglected age group in reading interest research. Findings from upper elementary grade investigations have often been generalized to younger pupils.

Teacher-pupil interaction as well as teacher interest interpretation and literary skills are generally neglected aspects of interest research. The limited research with teachers which is available is rather consistently critical of teacher skills in relation to pupils' reading interests and children's literature.

Throughout all this research and writing--there is much variation in the use of the term interests--a lack of consistency in defining the term. A quick review of references indicated more than a dozen meanings or uses of the term "interests." This of course adds to the difficulty in communicating and certainly presents problems when one attempts to draw generalizations.

One might expect these findings to influence the teacher education texts used with pre-service and in-service teachers.

Analysis of a number (more than 15) of texts often used in the introductory courses for the teaching of reading indicated several relatively consistent statements or inferences.

1. Interests are discussed very briefly in these texts. (This in spite of the consistent description of interests as a prominent factor in the pupil's selection of and response to reading materials.)

2. Interest inventories and interviews are by far the most often suggested technique for determining interests.

3. The pupil stated interests (gained through questionnaires) are considered usable expressions from which teachers are to determine reading interests.

4. A single measure of interests at each grade level will give the needed information.

5. Research findings are described as applying to broad categories (age, grade, sex, achievement levels, cultural and ethnic labels, socioeconomic status).

6. Research findings concerning pupils' story or book preferences are most often reported in categories such as animals, adventure, humor.

7. Very little, if any attention is given to the teacher skill of interpreting pupil interests to produce pupil reading interests.

8. Very little if any attention is given to the teacher skill of matching reading interests to reading material for the children.

What then do these texts recommend that the elementary classroom teacher do?

1. Secure a measure of interest from pupils.

2. Use an interest inventory or questionnaire.

3. Repeated use of an interest measure is seldom suggested.

4. Interpret the interest measure and infer reading interests from the interest measure.

5. Suggest books to the pupil based on your interpretation of his interests.

Some of the assumptions in these recommendations appear to be:

1. Pupils' expressed interests do indicate their reading interests.

2. Pupils' expressed interests and inferred reading interests are consistent over a specified period of time (most generally associated with his or her grade placement).

3. Teachers can in fact interpret reading interests from the results of interest measures.

4. Teachers can in fact match or recommend a book to a child in line with the interpreted reading interests.

So we decided to try what the text books recommended. We investigated the use of an individual, guided interview with primary level pupils in a southeastern metropolitan school system. In addition, we sued group techniques, repeated drawings with 27 classes, grades 1-3. We also observed primary level classroom teachers in efforts to interpret these interviews to infer reading interests and to recommend books for these readers.

In the process of examining these four assumptions that were mentioned we found:

1. Pupils' expressed interests did not reflect their reading interests. The percentage of agreement between pupils' expressed interests and expressed reading interests was less than 10%. We found some other interesting things through the interest inventory.

The first question we asked was "If you have an hour or two to spend as you please, what do you like best to do? Free play ranked first and televiewing ranked last--that was chosed the least times by pupils.

But when we asked pupils what if fact they usually did do after school--televiewing moved to first place. Situation

comedies ranked over cartoons in pupils' reported favorite T.V. programs. However, durable Fred Flintstone was still the favorite cartoon character. Only approximately 10% of their children report that they go to the movies as much as once a month.

In the interview a forced choice is asked of the child: Which do you like to do best: read books, listen to stories, watch T.V., go to the movies, play outdoors.

The children ranked the five activities as follows:

go to the movies, play outdoors, watch T.V., read books, and listen to stories.

Not a single child ranked "listening to stories" in the first position. All of the children interviewed could list three books or stories (modern fantasy, traditional fantasy, and most of the children indicated that these books were introduced more than a year ago).

2. When multiple measures of pupils' expressed reading interests were compared over a four month interval--only 34% of the (366) subjects expressed a reading interest in both measures which could even be classified under the same literary form category.

3. Teachers were able to interpret the pupil interests with at least 60% agreement with pupils' forced choice expression of interests. This success rate however did not carry over to the interpretation of reading interests. In less that 1/4 of the cases was there agreement between the teacher's interpretation of pupil reading interests and the pupils stated reading interests.

4. Teachers were unable to recommend a book for pupils' on the basis of interest in more than 60% of the cases.

They were able to appropriately classify books (noted by their pupils as favorites) with only some 42% success.

The bulk (90%) of books they recalled as children's favorites or best books for children were published more than 10 years ago.

Information traditionally given such as primary pupils prefer stories of fairy tales--may be helpful to an acquisition librarian but is of doubtful value to Mrs. Allgood the 1st grade teacher who needs to recommend a book to Betty, her pupil--who happens to be one of those few who doesn't like fairy tales--who in fact prefers informational books.

These findings encourage me to consider some other routes for measuring and evaluating pupil interests and to give additional attention to the classroom teachers' task of matching books and children.

I think all this impugns some of our assumptions and consequently our findings--and we probably aren't yet in a position to discuss children's reading interests.

Perhaps, we need to go back to some more basic questions that involve defining what we are trying to measure and we certainly need to take a closer look at what we are expecting of the classroom teacher.